DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 583 EA 031 582

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TITLE Changing Times, Changing Relationships: An Exploration of the Relationship between Superintendents and Boards of Education.

PUB DATE 2001-11-00

NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (Cincinnati, OH, November 2-4, 2001).

PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Board Administrator Relationship; *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Superintendents

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the superintendent and board of education has a significant impact on the quality of a district's educational program. This conceptual paper explores the implications of three distinct trends for that relationship: (1) changing demographics; (2) changes brought about by school reform; and (3) changes in superintendents themselves. The heart of this paper explores the impact of these trends on superintendent-board relationships in the future. After examining current research on superintendent-board relations, the paper considers recent demographic trends and speculates whether changing demographics would alter, in any substantive way, relations between superintendents and boards of education. In a similar vein, how do reforms such as the development of more comprehensive accountability systems (often tied to performance or merit pay for administrators) and changes in school governance models (such as the Chicago model) impact the relationship between superintendents and their school boards? Finally, how do changes in superintendents themselves--in their training and work experiences--affect their relations with school boards? Essentially, the authors ask whether any of these changes will influence or alter relations between superintendents and school boards and, if so, in what way? The essay concludes by posing a series of "Interesting Questions" meant to stimulate discussion and further research into board-superintendent relations. (Contains 49 references.) (RT)

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RUNNING HEAD: CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERINTENDENTS AND BOARDS OF EDUCATION

ED 463 583

Changing Times, Changing Relationships: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Superintendents and Boards of Education

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A Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the

University Council for Educational Administration

Cincinnati, OH

November 1-3, 2001

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Changing Times, Changing Relationships: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Superintendents and Boards of Education

Historically in the United States, states have delegated much of their authority over educational policy to local school districts. However, reform and restructuring efforts as well as a weakening economy have placed enormous political and financial pressure on schools to do more with less, yet continue to demonstrate effective leadership at the district level. Research literature focused on district leadership indicates that the relationship between the superintendent and board of education has a significant impact on the quality of a district's educational program.

This conceptual paper explores the implications of three distinct trends on the relationship between superintendents and boards of education: (1) changing demographics; (2) changes brought about by school reform; and (3) changes in superintendents themselves. The heart of this paper explores the impact of these trends on superintendent-board relationships in the future. After examining current research on superintendent-board relations, the paper examines recent demographic trends and speculates whether changing demographics would alter, in any substantive way, relations between superintendents and boards of education. In a similar vein, how do reforms such as the development of more comprehensive accountability systems (often tied to performance or merit pay for administrators) and changes in school governance models (such as the Chicago model) impact the relationship between superintendents and their school boards? Finally, how do changes in superintendents themselves—in their training and work experiences—affect their relations with school boards? Essentially, we ask whether any of these changes will influence or alter relations between superintendents and school boards and, if so, in what ways? The essay concludes by posing a series of "Interesting Questions" meant to stimulate discussion and further research into board-superintendent relations.

The School Board - Superintendent Relationship

A superintendent and a board can't sing two different tunes
and then expect the public to hum along.

Few people question the difficulty of providing leadership for our nation's schools. Boards of education and superintendents are often targets of criticism and live in a permanent state of turbulence and pressure. The concept of the "vulnerable superintendent" developed by Larry Cuban (1976) is even more appropriate today than twenty-five years ago. "District leaders are in an arena that is perpetually besieged by a *potpourri* of often conflicting forces: state laws and regulations, federal mandates, decentralized school management, demands for greater accountability, changing demographics, the school choice movement, competing community needs, limited resources, partisan politics, legal challenges, shortages of qualified teachers and principals and a general lack of respect for the education profession" (Usdan, McCloud, Podmostko, & Cuban, 2001, p. 26). These issues, coupled with a growing disenchantment of bureaucratic forms of school management, have eroded the district leader's ability to govern educational institutions effectively (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; Grogan, 1996; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996).

There are individuals within and outside of the educational arena that perceive the leadership roles played by the superintendent and board of education in governing the educational organization as well defined. Yet, numerous investigations examining the complexity of this relationship and the influence it has on the leadership of the school organization indicate otherwise (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Carpenter, 1987; Crowson, 1987; Kowalski, 1999; McCurdy, 1992; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Petersen & Short, 2001; Tallerico, 1989). Research in this area has consistently articulated that a poor relationship between the superintendent and the board of education deters school improvement (Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992), affects the quality of educational programs (Boyd, 1976; Nygren, 1992), weakens district stability and morale (Renchler, 1992), negatively influences the superintendent's credibility and trustworthiness with board members (Petersen & Short, 2001), impedes critical reform efforts, such as district

restructuring (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995), collaborative visioning and long-range planning (Kowalski, 1999), and eventually results in an increase in the "revolving door syndrome" of district leaders (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Renchler, 1992).

Board Decision-Making

Historically, boards of education have been used by aspiring politicians to begin building patronage and payback networks essential to seeking higher office (Bullard & Taylor, 1993). With their ability to create district policy, hire and fire administrators, in this case the superintendent, approve the budget, tenure teachers, and negotiate teacher's contracts, the power of the school board to move the district forward or force it into bureaucratic gridlock is tremendous. Studies that have previously concentrated on issues of school governance and reform have continually emphasized the importance of the school board in the educational process of the district (Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; Fullan, 1991; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). While school boards have power, they are usually unpaid, part-time, and untrained and, except for the information presented to them by the superintendent or perhaps what they pick up informally, they know little of the underlying issues for the scores of complex decisions requiring their approval at each board meeting (Cuban, 1976). Therefore, school boards rely on the professional judgment of the superintendent in many educational matters.

"Although school boards are representative bodies, they are expected to defer to the expertise of the superintendent and choose the "best" educational policies regardless of community preferences" (Greene, 1992, p. 220). Numerous studies have classified board orientations as either hierarchical or bargaining (Tucker & Zeigler, 1980), elite or arena (Lutz & Gresson, 1980), political or professional (Greene, 1992) in examining their influence on decision-making and school district governance. Findings from these, as well as other investigations examining board behavior (Hentges, 1986; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Nowakowski & First, 1989; Scribner & Englert, 1977; Zeigler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974) have chronicled the often times conflicting roles, responsibilities, and expectations of boards and their willingness or hesitancy to defer to the expertise of the superintendent in policy decisions. This dynamic continues to

generate areas of tension in the margin of control and governance of the school district. Zeigler (1975) argues that because of the conflicting expectations, "school boards behave like typical schizophrenics. On the one hand, they willingly (indeed eagerly) give power away to the experts…On the other hand, they espouse an ideology of lay control" (p. 8).

Traditionally the superintendent's role has been characterized as implementers of policies set by the board of education (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). Typical duties include maintaining the school budget, managing school personnel, and serving as public relations director. Yet, current challenges faced by school administrators, coupled with increasing demands for greater accountability and improved student academic achievement, have added to the already complex nature of school leadership. As a result, the superintendent's role can no longer focus solely on public relations and finance; it must be responsive to innumerable demands including the management of conflicting expectations and multiple agendas (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The superintendent's effectiveness is largely dependent on his or her ability to influence critical policy decisions. Most often, efforts to sway votes occur on a one-to-one basis between the superintendent and individual board members (Blumberg, 1985). As Wirt and Kirst (1997) observe, "Change generates demands in policymaking arenas to which superintendents respond with differing roles and styles of conflict management" (p. 159). It is these change forces to which we now turn.

Demographic Changes

"The landscape of public education is rapidly changing" (Tillman, 2001, p. 10). Schools in the U.S. are becoming increasingly diverse, due in large measure to a massive influx of Latino students into the school system (Fusarelli, 2000). Since 1980, the Latino population "has increased at a rate five times that of non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Asians combined" (Howe, 1994, p. 42). Since 1980, the percentage of Anglo students in public schools has steadily declined relative to "minority" youth (Reyes, Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Many districts "are still struggling with the challenges of serving these linguistically and culturally different students" (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias & Tinajero, 1998, p. xv). As districts across the

country become more diverse, they are also becoming less wealthy. Nearly one in four children live in poverty and the gap between rich and poor is widening.

Complicating these demographic changes are three other trends: one short term and the other two long term. First, after a decade of prosperity, the economy is slipping into a recession. Second, as the nation becomes increasingly non-white, it is also graying, particularly the Anglo majority. As a result, there is increasing pressure to allocate scarce resources toward the care of the elderly (who, among other things, vote in record numbers), leaving fewer dollars available for education. Third, the percentage of households with children is decreasing (20-25 percent nationwide, as low as 15 percent in some cities) (The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). This trend does not bode well for local school districts heavily dependent on local property tax revenue.

While politics has always been part and parcel of policymaking in education, there are indications that the demographic changes discussed above are contributing to a more divisive, politicized environment than has existed for at least a decade (for example, the 1990s was a decade of relative peace and prosperity). There is a "growing cultural divide among the citizenry" in the U.S. (Keedy & Björk, in press). Public education is under attack from both the Left and the Right, and proposals (some radical, some not) covering everything from governance to choice have been adopted in states and locales throughout the country (discussed below) (See also Cibulka, 1999). Survey data from the most recent AASA Study of the American Superintendency revealed that more than 57 percent of superintendents reported the existence of community interest groups actively engaged in debates over property taxes, curriculum issues, and school/community values (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). Across the nation, "school boards—the traditional linchpin of American educational governance—are facing a serious crisis of legitimacy and relevance" (The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992, p. 1).

School Reform: Reframing Governance and Administration

Throughout the U.S., school districts are "constantly undergoing change, stress, and transition, as communities elect new school board members, new demands are made on schools, and key leaders come and go" (Natkin, et al., 2001, p. 1). Within the past decade, state regulation

and intervention in schools has increased (a growing number of state laws permit state takeover of school districts), accountability statutes have been strengthened, becoming more comprehensive and sophisticated, the external threat to public education has increased, with the emergence of charter schools, vouchers, tuition tax credits, contracting out educational services to private contractors, and a re-invigorated home schooling movement, state and federal courts have remained active in education policy making, and a deepening economic recession has forced districts to do more with less. These forces have had a significant affect on education and, presumably, on superintendents and boards of education.

Of particular importance has been an overriding emphasis on educational accountability, often to the exclusion of other purposes of education (Fusarelli, 1999). Accountability reforms offering incentives and rewards to schools and, most controversially, to school personnel (teachers, administrators, and superintendents) have been implemented in several states (Cibulka, 1989). Performance bonuses are now a regular component of superintendent's contracts—some of which are quite substantial, as in the case of Atlanta superintendent Dr. Beverly Hall.

The Changing Face of the Superintendency

Within the last decade, in an attempt to improve often dismal school system performance, several states passed laws changing their certification requirements for superintendents, effectively permitting anyone—however trained—to become superintendent of a school district. The U.S. Department of Education, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, state governors and legislators have been discussing and critiquing the training and preparation of school leaders (Olson, 2000). Several states, including Michigan, Tennessee, and Illinois, have either partially or totally eliminated requirements for superintendent preparation. For example, in Tennessee, superintendents need only citizenship and a college degree (in any field of study) (Kowalski & Glass, in press). Many policymakers believe that training in business, politics, or the military is sufficient preparation to lead school district improvement efforts (Maher, 1988; Murphy, 1992).

Although this movement remains small (only fourteen school boards have chosen non-

traditional superintendents to lead their districts), these non-traditional leaders are becoming increasingly common in large, urban school systems. Until recently, three of the largest districts in the country—New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago—with over three million students combined, were being run by superintendents with no significant educational background, no advanced training in an educational administration preparation program, and no certification as a school administrator. Harold Levy in New York was a senior vice president of Citibank; Ray Romer (Los Angeles) was former governor of Colorado; Paul Vallas (Chicago – recently left) had extensive experience in public administration and business. This trend of hiring non-traditional superintendents to run school districts reflects the belief that advanced training in educational leadership or administration is unnecessary to lead and manage a school district effectively, although these non-traditional leaders may have extensive training in military or corporate leadership.

How might these trends affect board-superintendent relationships in the coming decade? We pose three "Interesting Questions" that merit further exploration.

Interesting Questions

1) Will the infusion of non-educators into the superintendency alter relationships between superintendents and school boards?

What happens, for example, when an individual unfamiliar with the education culture and workings of school boards is chosen to lead a school district? What happens when a board begins to contest policies promoted by the non-traditional superintendent? Or when the board interferes in personnel decisions made by the superintendent? Veteran school administrators are used to such occurrences, having experienced them (and engaged in other board conflicts) throughout their careers. But a non-traditional superintendent, coming from a radically different culture, whether it be the military, business, even the public sector—how will the inevitable cultural clash affect relations between the superintendent and the school board?

If understanding role differences is a major factor contributing to successful superintendent-board relationships, then how easily will non-traditional superintendents unfamiliar

with school processes and culture "fit" or meld into the culture of school boards? For example, some board members believe themselves far superior to "mere educators" such as the superintendent (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). What happens when the superintendent isn't an educator? Conversely, some boards have a history of "passive acquiescence" (Tallerico, 1989, p. 218), whereby board members seldom question the professional expertise of the superintendent. This paradigm is reinforced by superintendents themselves, who since the 1940s have portrayed themselves as professional educators (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000).

Assuming that boards value (to some degree) professional school experience, will they continue to be as acquiescent when the district is under the stewardship of a superintendent lacking that expertise? Or, would they be more likely to intervene in district issues such as curriculum and instruction? For example, it is not inconceivable that a school board would hire a non-traditional superintendent for his or her business and management expertise (such as successfully running a multimillion dollar corporation), yet be more likely to intercede in instructional affairs than if the superintendent had extensive school experience (in the classroom and in school administration). These avenues of inquiry are unexplored in the scholarly literature, in part because of the newness and relatively small number of non-traditional superintendents. However, as noted above, the number and visibility of such superintendents is a growing trend in educational leadership and governance, with possibly significant implications for board-superintendent relationships.

2) In an increasingly turbulent, politicized environment, will demographic changes and school reform initiatives alter, in any significant way, board-superintendents relationships? Or, will they continue to follow well-established patterns of behavior?

Although open to dispute among scholars, patterns of board-superintendent interactions follow fairly well established patterns of behavior along a continuum from amicable support to outright hostility. Although the media often portray boards and superintendents as at odds with one another, AASA's latest ten-year study revealed that 69 percent of superintendents reported their evaluations from school boards to be "excellent," and 22 percent were rated "good" (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). Only 14 percent of superintendents said they left "because of conflict with their

school boards" (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000, p. v).

McCarty and Ramsey (1971) classified boards as either dominated, factional, status congruent, or sanctioning, and the role of the superintendent as either functionary, political strategist, professional advisor, or decision-maker. Tallerico (1989) identified interactions between superintendents and school boards along "a continuum ranging from (a) *passive acquiescence* to (b) *proactive supportiveness* to (c) *restive vigilance*" (p. 218). Wirt and Kirst (1997) conclude that, "Different styles are all versions of the classic 'fight-flight' or 'exit-voice-apathy' characterization of how individuals act when confronted by threatening situations" (p. 166). Regardless of the terminology employed, it would seem as though the dimensions of superintendent-board relations have been fairly well mapped.

Perhaps the study of board-superintendent relations is an intellectual dead end, having been studied and analyzed to the point where there is nothing new to discover and learn. For example, the most recent Handbook of Research on Educational Administration contains scant mention of superintendents or school boards (Murphy and Seashore Louis, 1999), rather incredible given their responsibility for making and implementing local school policy. Recent studies of board-superintendents relations (See Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Keedy & Björk, in press) use McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) model of community power structures, board characteristics, and role of superintendents—a typology that is three decades old.

Although recent research has initiated investigations on how the district superintendent and school board president interact with each other in attending to their respective responsibilities in leading the school organization. Specifically, looking at their relationship and it's influence on issues of agenda construction and board decision-making (Petersen & Short, 2001; Petersen & Short, In Press). Research in this area remains scant.

Thus, additional theoretical and empirical research is needed to examine school board members' and superintendent's views of the current board/superintendent governance model and whether it is perceived as facilitating or impeding the leadership of the district and its ability to respond to the needs of children. Specifically we propose a series of studies investigating the

attitudes and opinions as well as the covariance between boards of education, superintendents, their views of the current board governance model, and its influence on the district's responsiveness to student learning and accountability. Have the pressures and changes discussed in this essay produced changes in the leadership patterns of districts? Perhaps it has made for more directive, or conversely, more diffuse leadership.

Recently, in New York City, a member of one of the city's 32 community school districts was overheard remarking that with the steady erosion of the power of school boards, he did not think they would exist in five years—with their governance functions being usurped by state government. While we believe the board member's prediction is overly pessimistic, it is true that school boards have been steadily losing power and authority over school governance for decades (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). This raises an interesting question. If the power of school boards has been curtailed in significant, and important ways, then how do these changes impact the relations between superintendents and school boards? If school boards are steadily losing power, are superintendents gaining power and authority over educational leadership and governance?[1]

3) Will the changes discussed in this essay *force* a change in the current board/superintendent governance model used throughout the country? Will the changes be of such magnitude that new governance models are necessary and, if so, what?

In the past decade, school boards and superintendents have come under attack. School boards, in particular, with their preoccupation with patronage and penchant for micromanagement, have been vilified for their ineffectiveness in a series of scathing national reports (See, for example, Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). Included among the host of recommendations for improvement were the establishment of local education policy boards, revision of school board election procedures, improved school board development, contracting out, improved board-superintendent relationships, or abolishing school boards altogether (allowing states to directly run schools).

It is unrealistic to believe that school boards will be abolished any time in the next several decades. No matter how ineffective they appear (and, as many point out, problems with the

educational system are not all the school board's fault), locally elected school boards occupy a vital place in American democracy (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Indeed, if all our representative bodies were threatened with dissolution based on poor performance, our democracy itself might not survive. School boards continue to enjoy widespread popular support, at least when suggestions to abolish the institution are made. School boards "provide local control and an accessible level of government. In a country committed to representative democracy, they provide citizen access that remote state and federal capitals cannot duplicate" (The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992, pp. 6-7).

Another study sharply critical of school boards agreed, stating that boards "enjoyed a great deal of grass-roots support and were viewed as an important mechanism for representative government" because they "dealt with two of the most important elements in citizen's lives: their children and tax dollars" (Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992, p. 51). "States and communities are likely to favor less far-reaching reforms to the existing school governance system" (The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992, p. 2). In addition, given the mixed success of state takeovers of failing school districts, there is no concrete evidence that state departments of education could do a better job running local school districts than existing school boards. Thus, despite its shortcomings, it is unlikely that the school board-superintendent governance model will be abolished in the near future. What, then, of the future of local school governance? In an era of significant pressure and change, what will be the roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents of the future?

Summary

We have raised three interesting questions that we believe should frame research on board-superintendent relationships in the coming decade. All three avenues of inquiry are important and relevant to practitioners and scholars alike. We are disturbed by the lack of recent theoretical research on school boards and superintendents (the "golden age" of theory-building in this area seems to have occurred in the late 1960s and early-mid 1970s). Many of our theoretical constructs are decades old. Recent changes in schools and society necessitate a re-examination of our conceptualizations of school boards, superintendents, and relationships therein. Thus, we conclude

with a call for more research in this important area, with particular emphasis on theory building, hypothesis generation, and testing.

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[1] Disagreement exists among scholars on this point. For example, Wirt and Kirst (1997) assert that school boards, superintendents, and central office administrators have been losing power and authority over decision-making since 1950 (more than five decades). However, Glass, Björk and Brunner (2000) view the local policy making as a pendulum of power swinging back and forth between the superintendent and school board.

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